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ABSTRACT

The use of poetry in the second language class is explored as a means of gentle, non-threatening communication. Techniques for using poetry to teach intonation, using adjectives, verbs, pronunciation, and syntax, as well as for offering the student another means of expressing feelings, are explored. Sample poems and lessons are discussed, and several additional exercises are appended. Most of the poetry used was written by the teacher and students. Contains eight references. (Author/MSE)

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Communicating Through Poetry in an ESL Classroom

MARY STARZ

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FL 025 205

Communicating Through Poetry in an ESL Classroom

MARY STARZ

Persuading students to communicate with their teacher is a great challenge. This paper explores the use of poetry as a means of gentle non threatening communication. It demonstrates the use of poetry to teach intonation, the use of adjectives, verbs and various aspects of pronunciation and syntax as well as offering the student another means of expressing feelings. The author includes a bibliography and some sample lessons. Most of the poetry used has been written by the author and her students. The most important point of this paper is that the students do communicate with their teachers and given time they also learn English while enjoying their class.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is written with the ESL student in mind and not with any age or grade level. The information contained here can be used with any age or level as long as the teacher chooses the appropriate poetry with care. However, most of the work used in the paper was accomplished with middle school students between the ages of 11 and 14. Some of the students were more advanced than others.

When a poem is cited, if the name and grade are given, it indicates that the poem was written by a student or a group of students together. If there is no grade stated, then the poem was taken from a published work (see bibliography). This paper is not based on a formal research design, rather it is a compilation of work done in the classroom.

One of the foremost problems that occurs in classrooms and especially in ESL classrooms is the inability to get students to communicate with the teacher, whether in written form or spoken form. Many ways have been tried--from calling on individual students to answer questions aloud, to having them write essays. Recently teachers have been using the journal, an excellent means of communication between teacher and students. However, even with journals, there are some students who can not express their feelings because they worry about correct structure and fear of rejection.

Poetry is another way of communicating which seems to be less threatening to some students. It provides an outlet for creative expression and it helps a shy person communicate with others by taking away the immediate worry of correct punctuation and prose structure. I have found that by using poetry I can get students to participate orally in class and at the same time they seem to want to write more in their journals. These findings are not formal research; they are the results of my love of poetry and my wish to share it with students.

I first explain to the students that poetry is another way of letting someone know how you feel. I find out how they feel about poetry and if they have ever experienced any. I find out why they either like or dislike it. Many children have been exposed to nursery rhymes in their native language which are a form of poetry. Immediately, I let them know that poetry does not have to rhyme all the time. Rhyme is a way of creating sound patterns. I do point out to students that rhyme can help them remember words or phrases. Rhyme can consist of two or more words (i.e. Go, slow, Joe) or phrases that repeat the same sound. Rhyme words are quite often spelled similarly, but that is not a

mandatory condition. What matters is the sound. (Pain drives me insane.) This is a great way to practice distinguishing between sounds. In linguistics its the use of minimal pairs. Two words that are separated by only one sound change: pin, tin. Poetry most of all for me is an invitation--An invitation to have fun while learning to manipulate the language. So come along and have some fun.

Feelings

First let us see how feelings can be expressed, for example, happiness:

Free Time
(7th Grade)

No homework!
I feel so happy
NO
Homework
Tonight!

or

The Champs
(7th grade)

Yes! Yes! We
won the game.
They thought
WE could not
win but
WE DID!

This is called free form poetry. There is really no rhyme to it and it is not complicated, but it gives the student a different feeling from ordinary prose writing. More exciting than just:

We have no homework tonight. I'm so happy.
We won the game. They thought we couldn't win, but we did.

You will notice that the beginning of every line is capitalized as are some words in the poem itself. One can explain here to the students that the capitalized words in the poem are for emphasis. The beginning of each line is capitalized because it is the beginning such as in a regular sentence. However, not all poetry has to be written in this same way.

One poem that I like which illustrates feelings, non rhyming, and no capitals or punctuation is the poem by Nikki Giovanni. It also illustrates the fact that you can write a poem for and about other people.

poem for rodney
by Nikki Giovanni

people ask me what
am i going to be
when i grow
up and i always
just think
i'd like to grow
up

This poem illustrates to the students that they are not the only ones who are uncertain about their lives. It is also great for those students who are having problems writing because they are hesitant about capital letters and punctuation. A teacher can go through this poem and point out those things which should be capitalized. A whole lesson can be built around punctuation and capitalization using this simple poem.

In contrast to this poem you can use something like the following poem for feelings of sadness.

It is Grey Out
by Karla Kuskin

It is grey out.
It is grey in.
In me
it is as grey as the day is grey.
The trees look sad
and I,
not knowing why I do,
cry.

This poem contains correct punctuation and capitalization along with a very sad feeling. While the poem written by Giovanni is about someone else, this one gives the impression that it is about how the poet feels.

At this point in a student's life they make and lose friends very quickly, however, sometimes one of their best friends moves away. I had one such case and I could not understand why suddenly one of my students was not doing her work, she was distracted and seemed very sad. After asking some of the other students if they knew what was wrong I found out that her best friend had moved away. I looked through my anthology and found the following poem. I used it to explore the idea of long distance friendships and how even though someone is gone, they can still be our friend.

I CANNOT FORGET YOU
by Makah [Found in Children's Anthology (See Bibliography)]

No matter how hard I try to forget you, you
always come back to my thoughts.
When you hear me singing I am really crying
for you.

We all talked about friends or family that had "gone away" either by moving or dying. I feel that knowing that others had these feelings of loneliness helped my student. We talked about expressing our sadness and we wrote poems. Some examples are:

Hide and Seek
by Aurora Hernandez (8th grade)

Even if you went away and I miss you
I pretend that you are only hiding
And that I will find you soon.

im sad
by Raúl Cabezas (6th grade)

ay thenk of my uncle en ay cry
caz his gon tu amarillo en
it far awey from her en ay cand si hem

Raúl is learning to speak English as well as read and write it. We worked on his poem until he could spell all the words correctly. We did this not by criticizing or actually correcting the poem, but by my introducing the various words as part of the vocabulary for each day. As he began to recognize the words, he changed them on his own. It takes time, but I think that its worth it.

Every once in awhile I have the students bring out some of the poetry they have written and we talk about how we could change it now that they know more descriptive words. I don't talk about poetry everyday, but I am always thinking of ways in which it can help the students to study or to understand situations better. In Study Skills/ESL we have been talking about organization of time and materials, so we wrote this little poem to help them remember:

(7th grade)
Be prepared and be neat
At school and play
Every day
Save your time and your feet!

Poetry fun

Not all poetry has to be serious it can be silly as we saw by the previous example. I will always remember a poem which I learned back in my elementary school days:

The Purple Cow
by Gelett Burgess

I never saw a Purple Cow
I never hope to see one;
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I'd rather see than be one.

This poem illustrates the freedom a person has in writing poetry. You can have your students think of something they would not like to be, real or imaginary, and make up a short poem about it. I like to do this in class, on the chalkboard, then I also tell the students that if they want to write one of these in their journals they may. (Some of them like to illustrate their poetry.) This helps them use their imagination and creativity also. Here are a couple of my favorite poems written by students.

A Flying Horse
by Jaime (7th grade)

A flying horse
Has much fun
Of course
I want to be one.

A Dead Snail
Joe (7th grade)

I wouldn't be a snail
So tiny and small
'Cause if I was stepped on
I would be dead.

There are many other uses for poetry such as increasing vocabulary, emphasizing the use of verbs and adjectives, learning the rhythm of the language, learning to use tone for emphasis, etc.. Going into lessons for all of these things would require a lengthy paper and since we do not have that luxury we will take a quick look at some examples of some of these things.

The First example is about similarity in sound but difference in spelling. We also have rhyme and silliness. My favorite illustrations of these are: I Scream and Going to Extremes.

I Scream
(Anonymous)

I scream, you scream
We all scream
For Ice Cream

Going to Extremes
by Richard Armour

Shake and Shake
The catsup bottle
None'll come
And then alot'll

These two poems illustrate how words can have a similar sound even though they are not spelled the same. For example, I scream and ice cream. It is mostly a matter of how the words are said and where the emphasis is placed. This is a good place to talk about intonation and stress. Have the students find words that rhyme but are not spelled the same as an out-of-class assignment. Hint: advertisements, commercials.

Type of Poetry

Use poetry which appeals to the age of your students and what they like to do; a Children's Anthology is very helpful for middle school age students if you do not compose poetry yourself. For older students you might want to use poetry found in American or English Literature Anthologies. This is a good opportunity to tell your students that they can write or talk about any sport or game they enjoy. Have your students write about their own culture or homeland. It is also a good chance to have them write some more on the chalkboard. Remember poems do not have to be long and elaborate. You might even want to give the students a list of words from a story they have read or something they have been studying and have them arrange the words in a poem. Arranging the words in a poem could be simply writing them in the form of a column in some order so as to create meaning. For example, let's say that the following words are part of the vocabulary for the day: train, relax, arrive, school, play. Let us also say that the teacher has asked the students to write sentences with those words. Following are some sample sentences written as a student might write them then put into a "poem".

1. I saw the train.

2. My mom likes to relax and watch TV.

3. My aunt will arrive tonight.

4. I go to school.

5. I like to play.

relax
on the train
arrive at
school
play

If the students are encouraged to do this type of exercise they will have an easier time remembering the words and how to use them. Of course, not all words are this easy to arrange, but all words can be arranged in a poetic form.

Poetry can be used to introduce verbs and adjectives. In a poem the student gets the feeling for how a word is used especially if emphasis is placed on it when a poem is read. The following two poems illustrate the use of adjectives and verbs.
Spring time rope skippers might enjoy the first poem.

Rope Rhyme
by Eloise Greenfield

Get set, ready now, jump right in
Bounce and kick and giggle and spin
Listen to the rope when it hits the ground
Listen to that clappedy-slappedy sound
Jump right up when it tells you to
Come back down, whatever you do
Count to a hundred, count by ten
Start to count all over again
That's what jumping is all about
Get set, ready now,
jump
right
out!

The next poem is for those brave souls who like to move fast. Notice in these two poems the shape plays an important part in the presentation of the poem.

The Sidewalk Racer
by Lillian Morrison

Skimming
an asphalt sea
I swerve, I curve, I
sway; I speed to whirring
sound an inch above the
ground; I'm the sailor
and the sail, I'm the
driver and the wheel
I'm the one and only
single engine
human auto
mobile.

The next poem utilizes capital letters and exclamation points. It is really quite simple but it conveys excitement and emotion, plus it gives the students some fun "sound" words to play with. First it is written as normal, then separated as I do for my students.

The Fourth
by
Shel Silverstein

Oh
CRASH!
my
BASH!
it's
BANG!
the
ZANG!
Fourth
WHOOSH!
of
BAROOM!
July
WHEW!

This poem portrays the sounds heard during a celebration--conveys excitement and tells us what celebration it is. You might want to try this with other holidays and see what your students convey to you about how they feel about certain holidays. When you separate the poem as follows the students get a good idea of how easy it is to express their feelings in a poem.

The Fourth
by
Shel Silverstein

Oh

CRASH!

my

BASH!

it's

BANG!

the

ZANG!

Fourth

WHOOSH!

of

BAROOM!

July

WHEW!

Meanings

Meanings in poems are conveyed by the arrangement of the words, but you don't want to get caught up in delving into the meanings too much if you are only trying to help the student learn vocabulary and various other word usage, and, most

importantly, if you are trying to get the students to communicate with you. When you read their poems in their journals you can consider meaning more because they will be telling you, the teacher, something about themselves. You can however, emphasize certain feelings or emotions by emphasizing phrases or words. For example in the first two little poems at the beginning of the paper the capitalization of **No** and **We did** makes the feeling of the poem more emphatic, as does the capitalization in this Fourth of July poem.

Another way to get students to communicate orally is to create a poem in class. There are several ways to do this even if you do not consider yourself a poet. Robert Morgan uses anagram word games as a form of poetry. You can also get your students to participate in class and increase their vocabulary by using anagrams. This type of poetry is sometimes called Spore Prose.

Mountain Graveyard
by Robert Morgan

stone	notes
slate	tales
sacred	cedars
heart	earth
asleep	please
hated	death

All these words evoke feelings of death. You can lighten the mood for your students by picking a topic that is lighter and maybe more relevant and working with them to find anagrams. Example: read-dare.

My favorite classroom activity involving poetry is to use the students' names to make poems. The students love to see their names in print and at times I have written down what we compose on the chalkboard and later typed it on the computer and returned it to the students. Here is an example of this type of poetry, formally called Acrostic Poetry.

Sharing new friendships

These are some examples of poems done in a Middle School ESL classroom:

R aul is
A very kind
U nderstanding
L eader

B ut he has
A n attitude that
C an make us
A fraid of him.

E verybody
R emembers that
I
C an't sing
A nd they won't let me try.

M aybe we
A rgue too much but I am
R ight
I n believing you're my
O nly real friend

J ust because
O f the way you are
S ome day we will
H ave a great team.
Y ou
A nd me
T ogether for
E ver
S on.

These poems were written during class. The first three we put on the chalkboard. The last one was handed in as an assignment.

Not all of the students' efforts come out as fabulous poetry, but they do show you, the teacher, how that student is feeling at that moment. This may give you an idea for further lessons and for better understanding of your students.

I hope that I have been able to give you some ideas of what you can do with poetry which is really just another form of communication. Let your imagination run wild and let your students' imaginations run wild. Of course this paper is not to propose that using poetry will get all of your ESL students to communicate with you, but you will reach a large number especially if you make it fun and exciting. One other point you might want to consider which really helps when students write in their journal is the following: Unless you are emphasizing a particular grammatical point, don't mark up a student's poem with a red pen. Write your suggestions on the margins with a lead pencil. Remember, this is a creation from the heart.

On the following pages I have included some sample lessons that you may want to use with your students. Using poetry in your ESL classroom does not have to be a lot of extra work and it can be very rewarding as a non threatening way for your students to communicate their feelings and an excellent way for you to learn what they are thinking. It also gives students the ability to manipulate the language while learning to speak and write it. For most students, it takes the monotony out of learning.

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APPENDIX
Communicating Through Poetry in an ESL Classroom

Suggestions for Student Assignments

1. Expressing feelings

Write one or two sentences on how you feel right now or on how you felt over the weekend. Then put the words in the form of a poem. Emphasize the words that are the most important to the expression of the feeling.

Example: I am very lonely on weekends. I miss my friends.

I am
VERY lonely
on
weekends.
I MISS
my
friends.

I hurt myself so badly it made me cry.

PAIN
Hurt
Tears
ME

2. Homework Fun Assignment: Find 10 pairs of words that sound the same but are made up of several words: I scream/ice cream, keep out/key pout, to me/tummy, my knee/money, etc. You will have to listen hard for these words because they only sound the same when used in normal speech. Look for them on signs. Listen for them in commercials or find them in magazines. Write down where you found the words. Write a funny poem with them. TEACHERS: You may want to use this for a more advanced class.

In class: Use the lists to increase vocabulary- To differentiate the sounds and discuss how the words differ and how they are the same. The students can discuss how the words were being used in the commercial, sign, etc. Variation: Words **spelled the same** but have one sound different: pin-tin, he-me, pay-may, snow/slow in other words--minimal pairs.

3.- Same as above only find words that rhyme **but are not spelled the same** . For example: pie/eye, etc. Write a little poem with some of the words. Example:

I got
Pie in
my eye
when **I**
went **by** the bakery.

4. In class write anagrams then use them in a loose form poem. You might want to use words you are studying in a story if they lend themselves to anagrams. Or have the students make up their own: Example: read--dare, kids--skid, tops--spot and so forth.

5. In class write poems using the students' names on the chalkboard with the whole class participating or make it a small group activity and have the students in each group

use each others names. These poems could be descriptive or they could contain a message or express a feeling.

Example: **L** ovely
I ngenious
L ikeable
I maginative
A miable

R emember
O ur meeting after
B asketball practice.
E ven if we stay late, Mr.
R amos will be waiting
T o take us home.